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CITY LIFE AND NEW URBANISM

Cover Page Footnote

Ray Gindroz, architect, is managing principal and co-founder of Urban Design Associates, a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based architectural firm.

CITY LIFE AND NEW URBANISM

Ray Gindroz*

I. URBANISM AND CIVILITY

Imagine places of civility in which people with nothing in common share the public realm. That's urbanism. As described by Richard Sennet in *The Uses of Disorder*, these places enable us to come into contact with "others"—people different from ourselves. And this contact, however brief, has the capacity to change us, teach us new things about ourselves, and enable us to grow as human beings.

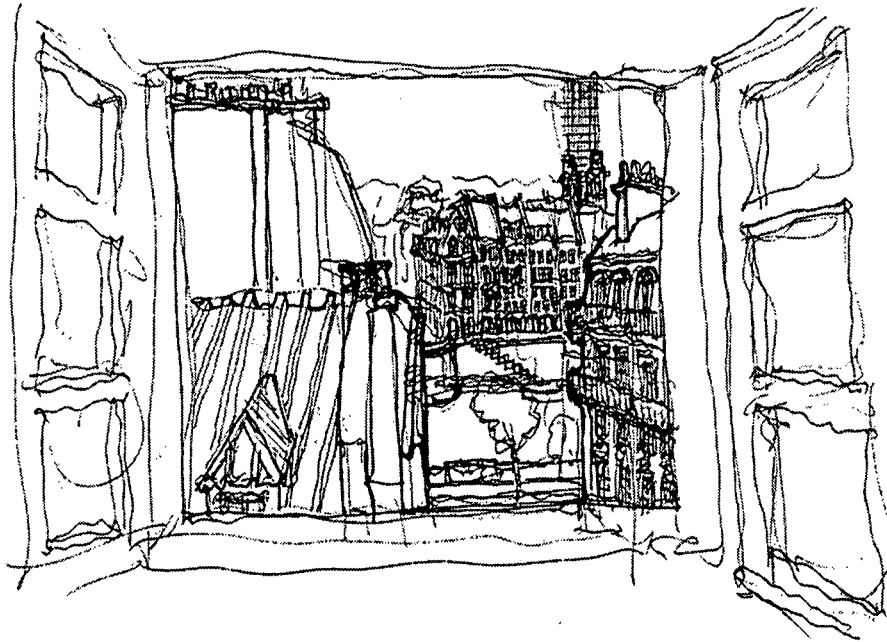
Urbanity is inherently associated with courtesy, refinement, polish, civilities, courtesies, and amenities. But urbanity is a quality many American cities lost in the second half of the twentieth century.

Yet we still yearn for urban places where we have the opportunity for chance encounters that spark new ideas and opportunities: on the walk to school or as we ride a bus to the other side of the city. In urban neighborhoods, we can sit by our window and participate in the life of the city. In her waning years, when she was mostly housebound with crippling arthritis, Colette's view from her apartment window overlooking the garden of the Palais Royal in Paris frequently stimulated her final memoirs *The Blue Lantern* and *The Evening Star: Recollections*.

These books are filled with reminiscences of her life and the life of the street she could observe from that window on the world. The American front porch is another example of urbanism - indeed, one of the richest - with its close relationship between the private world of the house and the larger public realm. James Agee described this relationship:

It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and standing up into their sphere of possession of trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the

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The view from the window

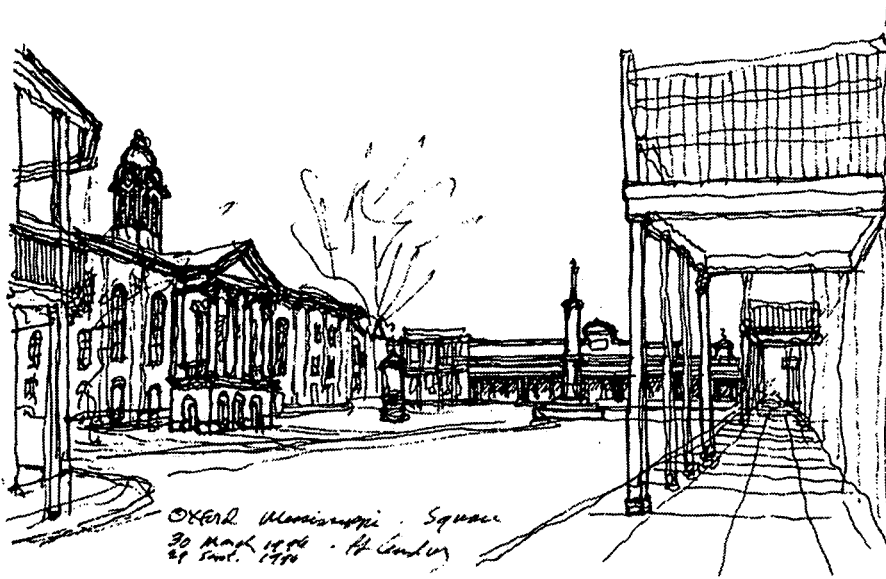
asphalt; a loud auto; a quite auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling. . . .¹

Then there are the great, large-scale civic spaces that bring people together: Rockefeller Center, Times Square, Fifth Avenue, the Champs Elysees, the Piazza San Marco. These remain fixed in the memories of millions of people as important places in their lives, even if visited only once. Such places become a shared focus of many people's lives; they are places in which many of us are at ease with ourselves and with each other.

The most effective urban spaces, the ones that make us feel the most comfortable, have an almost room-like quality. They are "whole" places. The street does not merely carry large volumes of traffic. Rather, the street harmonizes with the facades of the buildings along it. Rather than shout for attention as individual objects, the buildings work with one another to create a unified whole. There are people and activities in the space and the presence of windows, doorways, balconies, and porches provides places for people to observe and create a safe and secure public space.

Paris provides one excellent model of urbanism in which the cross section is the key. Taken from a perch in a balloon, an aerial

1. CHARLES MOORE ET AL., *THE PLACE OF HOUSES* 201 (1974) (quoting James Agee).



An American Urban Room in Oxford Mississippi

photograph of Paris in the nineteenth century clearly shows the boulevards under construction and the cross section. This system was applied broadly across the city. A substantial part of the city's greatness derives from the fact that the upper floors of the buildings in all districts are residential and that each structure has a mixed-income population.

Before elevators, the most expensive apartments were one or two stories above ground. They had the highest ceilings and the most elaborate ornamentation. The next floors, with more steps to climb and slightly lower ceilings, housed the middle class. On the top were the garrets for storage and servants. With the introduction of elevators, the hierarchy became altered, but a wide mix still existed in each building. All of these residential spaces sit on top of public uses. The approach offers an abiding principle for contemporary development of urban spaces.

The painting, "Man at the Window," by the impressionist Gustav Caillebotte helps us understand still further the importance of this. As spectators, we are inside a room—and along with the man in the painting—we gaze out at another room, an urban room. The young man has leapt up from his chair. A young woman is crossing the street. The man is clearly connected to both the interior and the exterior spaces, by his physicality and his gaze. The window is vertically proportioned; through it we see the same proportion of windows on the facades that create the urban room of the streets.



Man at the Window sketched by Paul Ostergaard
original painting by Gustave Caillebotte

There is a unity created in the visual fabric of this streetscape. From the streets, we see these windows that mark the spaces as places of human habitation. We are not in an anonymous place. We are in a neighborhood or quarter that is looked after by the many people who live there.

These spaces and qualities are essential for the continuing development and health, not only of our cities, but of civilization itself.

II. ANTI-URBAN URBANISM FRACTURES THE FABRIC OF CITIES

After World War II, the drive towards rapid development of U.S. cities and regions spawned methods of building towns and cities that were profoundly "anti-urban." Instead of building whole places, the new system produced an endless series of isolated fragments which pull apart and isolate the city.

The then-present attitude of architecture separated individual buildings from their inherited contexts and failed to relate them to their adjacent buildings to create a congenial urban space. A central theme of the Modernist Movement encouraged this behavior. The theme was a break with history and the traditions of architecture. At the time, it was considered shameful to work in anything but a modernist vocabulary. The insistence that every work be an "original invention," rather than part of the ongoing architectural evolution, led to the creation of placeless urban environments.

Once such fragmentation began, it spread into the segregation of building use through zoning ordinances and the emergence of the suburban form. It did not take long for this to have negative impacts on the social fabric of society, segregating populations by social class and undermining the mixed-use, mixed-income characteristics of cities that had not only defined them, but that had been the wellspring of their vibrancy and economic vitality. Mixed-use, mixed income neighborhoods turned into single-use, single-income enclaves connected by roads for vehicles, not pedestrians.

The impulse towards efficiency brought about bureaucratic separation of all the parts and pieces of a city that need to be assembled to create wholeness. While this may have been useful for rapid redevelopment in the post World War II era, this intentional separation of the agencies responsible for roads, traffic, buildings, trees, parks, etc., became institutionalized, eventually creating self-protective fiefdoms in local governmental structures.

In our cities, the impulse to rebuild did great damage. By the end of the Second World War, our cities were in disrepair and in

need of major renewal. The Federal Urban Renewal Program provided funding to acquire and demolish derelict areas within our cities. Unfortunately, the program lacked a clear vision of how to rebuild. Instead of building on the lessons learned from two centuries of American city building, urban renewal was driven by a rather vague notion that the center of cities must look like the suburbs to better compete with them. We no longer had urban spaces that were rooms. We instead had turned them into disjointed pieces of furniture. More often than not, the results were failed attempts to turn traditional Main Streets into shopping malls, business districts into office parks, and neighborhoods into projects.

We created new, isolationist patterns that separated uses. Downtown, parking lots or parking garages and the blank facades of inward-looking building complexes began to dominate our streets. Housing became segregated by funding, isolating both the rich and the poor. City life withered for a lack of urbanism. We became alienated from our environment. And the result is we no longer walk anywhere. Our kids are bussed or driven, and every little venture from home becomes a voyage.

Yet the need for urbanism did not diminish. Quite the contrary, the need became more urgent. And it began to be found in unexpected places, the most stunning of which was Disneyland. In his landmark essay, *You Have to Pay for the Public Life*, Charles Moore mourned the loss of urbanism in downtowns and pointed out that we now have to pay admission for the only places that provide an urban experience:

Disneyland must be regarded as the most important single piece of construction in the West in the past several decades, . . . single handed[ly], it is engaged in replacing many of those elements of the public realm which have vanished in the featureless private floating world of southern California whose only edge is the ocean and whose center is otherwise undiscoverable. . . . Curiously, for a public place, Disneyland is not free. You buy tickets at the gate. But then, Versailles cost someone a great deal of money, too. Now, as then, you have to pay for the public life.²

Disneyland's Main Street, and other places like it, have the essential qualities of urbanism. Their spaces are room-like, they are lined with windows and activity, and filled with people. Oddly enough, Main Street Disneyland became a model for urban revival.

2. CHARLES W. MOORE, *YOU HAVE TO PAY FOR THE PUBLIC LIFE: SELECTED ESSAYS OF CHARLES W. MOORE* 124-26 (Kevin Keim ed., 2001).

III. NEW URBANISM: A REVIVAL

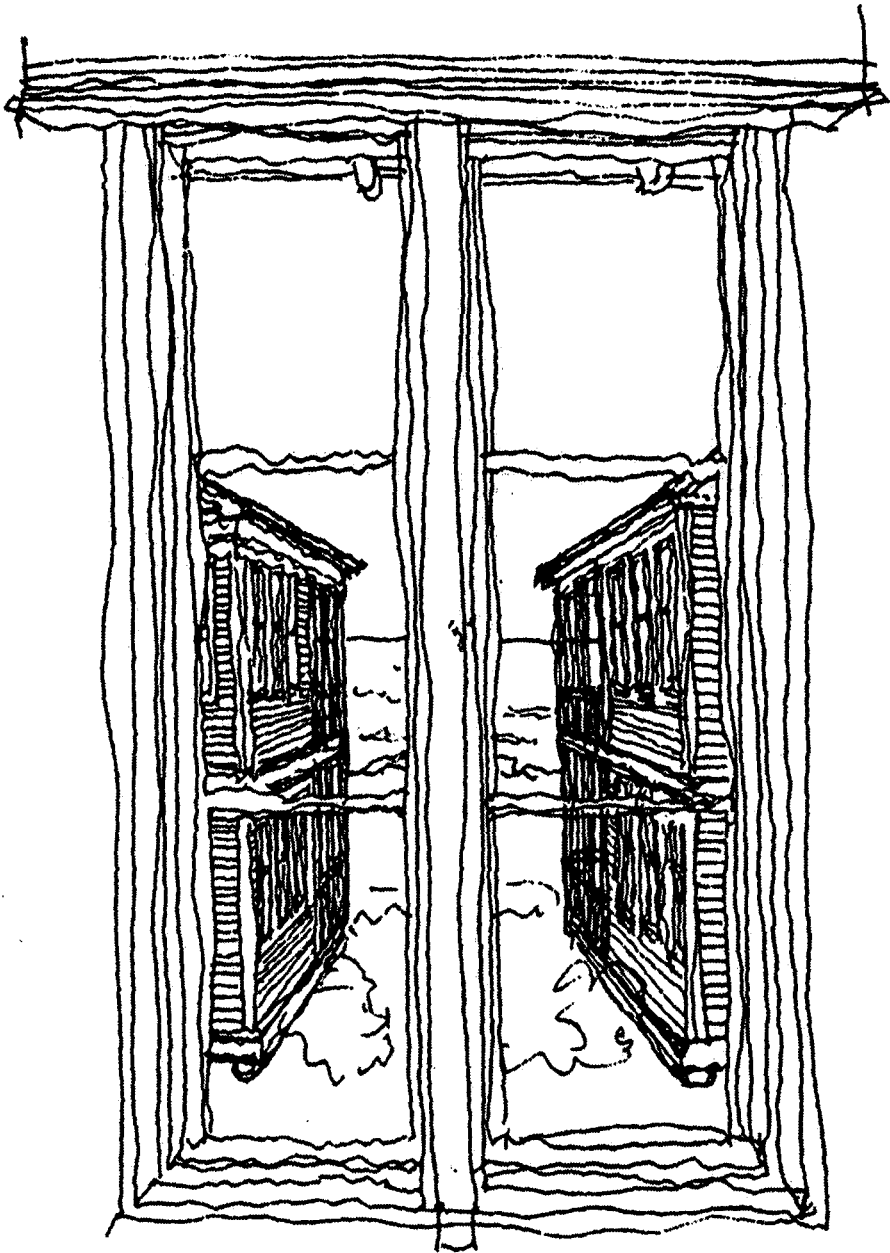
Throughout the dark years for urbanism, many people retained their passion for urban places. In the 1960s, Jane Jacob's book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was avidly read by planners, architects, and preservationists. Even more importantly, it was considered by neighborhood residents who wanted to preserve their own urban places. In various parts of the country, urban designers, architects, and community groups developed plans to create good neighborhoods and to restore the urban qualities of downtowns.

The obstacles were formidable. For example, we at Urban Design Associates prepared a master plan for the Randolph neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia in the mid 1970s. The area had been cleared by urban renewal, but after meeting with residents we proposed that the area should be rebuilt as a traditional neighborhood. The plan was a radical departure from conventional urban renewal planning because we proposed a neighborhood, not a collection of projects. We sought to create a series of streets, lined with houses and their porches, with front yard and backyards for each unit. Although this approach followed the traditional patterns of surrounding areas, it required both public agencies and private developers to create a "whole place" rather than separate elements. The results were successful and twenty-five years later, the neighborhood looks like it was always there.

Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s these principles began to be applied to new development at the edges of cities and even in rural areas. Instead of building subdivisions or developments, a few pioneers began building traditional towns. This movement, first called Neo-Traditional planning, has flowered into what we now call New Urbanism.

The most celebrated of these early efforts is Seaside. Its developer, Robert Davis, was inspired by the Ideal New Towns built in the Italian Renaissance. These new towns became models for the way in which cities could be rebuilt. Seaside, a small resort town on the Florida Panhandle designed by Duany Plater-Zyberk, created a town square and a series of small-scale neighborhood streets similar to those of traditional towns. It was a stunning success, and it made headlines across the country because it was so shocking to find a civilized, mixed-use place emerging in the "wilds" of suburbia.

Although these new towns emerged in suburban, even semi-rural, environments, they were all being created by a diverse group of



*Anniversary Letter, Seaside
9.18.98 Ray Gandy*

View from the window
Seaside, Florida

urban planners, developers, architects, and others whose hearts and sensibilities were rooted in the city and a love of urbanism. The revival of urbanism in new places has rekindled urbanist initiatives in the cities themselves. The success of these new towns gave courage to inner city neighborhoods to revive their own traditions even in the face of tremendous odds.

IV. DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR URBANISM

Until recently, urbanists and architects devoted to reinvisioning our cities lacked a cohesive voice to espouse a new system for (re)building our cities. Since its founding, the Congress for the New Urbanism ("CNU") has been actively addressing that challenge. Through advocacy and influence, CNU is reasserting the role of the urbanist in shaping the urban environment. Great strides have been made.

As stated by its charter, the Congress for the New Urbanism views the disinvestment in central cities; the spread of placeless sprawl; increasing separation by race and income; environmental deterioration; loss of agricultural lands and wilderness; and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge. It stands for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions and the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts. It is committed to re-establishing the relationship between the art of building and the making of community.

At Urban Design Associates, thirty-five years of practice, mostly in existing cities—and in the most troubled parts of cities—has led us to formulate a philosophy and a set of practices for our work in city-building that we find articulated harmoniously in the principles of CNU's Charter.

While I will not elaborate all twenty-seven principles here, five of the principles are most germane to this article and so I present them here for your reference.

Five Principles Excerpted from The Charter of The Congress for the New Urbanism

Twelve: Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young. Interconnected networks of streets should be designed to encourage walking, reduce the number and length of automobile trips, and conserve energy.

Sixteen: Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes. Schools should be sized and located to enable children to walk or bicycle to them.

Nineteen: A primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use.

Twenty-Two: In the contemporary metropolis, development must adequately accommodate automobiles. It should do so in ways that respect the pedestrian and the form of public space.

Twenty-Three: Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities.

A public process is a fundamental tenet of New Urbanism. The public process brings together all interested stakeholders, breaking down the isolation inherent in modern cities. At the same time, the process helps ensure that all who participate come away feeling that they've had a real voice in expressing their desires and concerns and a tangible role in creating their revitalized community. That includes a say in prioritizing what gets built, where it gets built, and what character is created for the neighborhood as a whole.

New Urbanist principles call for a seamless relationship between new development, regardless of its uses, and the broader context within which it will exist, thereby creating a sense of harmony in the neighborhood that engages its citizenry and builds neighborhood pride. When new development responds to the best characteristics of local traditions and forms, it also attracts reinvestment and renewed economic vitality in previously distressed neighborhoods.

Focusing design efforts on public spaces with human-scale sensibilities helps restore a sense of comfort to urban environments so that people once again feel comfortable within our urban environments and find them hospitable places to live, work, and play. We victimize ourselves with our own myopia when we fail to see that the problems of the inner city are linked with those of its adjacent neighborhoods; the problems of the adjacent neighborhoods with those at the edges of the city; and so on, outward, into the region and into the interconnectedness of regions. For that reason, it is crucial that we understand and apply urbanist principles on both the macro and micro scale. Only in this way can we see all the discrete pieces as organic parts of a larger whole, which enables us

to restore wholeness to our cities while preserving or re-creating the qualities that make individual neighborhoods unique, special places.

V. PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

The Congress for the New Urbanism has more than 2000 members from disciplines including finance, architecture, and sociology. Despite our diversity, we are a collegial group of individuals with two things in common: a passion for traditional urban environments and a frustration with the obstacles that make it difficult to create them. Due to our diversity, the applications to which we apply the principles contained in CNU's Charter are generally quite varied.

At Urban Design Associates, the principles are a core component of our professional philosophy. We have also found it immensely beneficial to standardize procedures, while at the same time building in mechanisms to make sure that each result is uniquely suited to its context and community. The design process can be highly complex and often it is conducted under intense public scrutiny. This has caused us to develop a series of techniques and methods for developing master plans that respond to a broad range of constantly changing conditions.

A. An Organized Public Design Process

We have found it essential to actively and creatively engage a broad range of participants in the design process, at all stages of design, most especially during the first stage, which entails data collection and analysis. By asking people to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the community, we learn what to preserve and build upon, and what to change. By asking what people would like to see, we establish criteria and design principles to be used to evaluate design ideas as they emerge. By asking about specific places, we learn where action is needed. A consensus on principles and goals provides a solid platform on which to develop a design.

B. Urban Analyses of Contexts

We need to understand in detail the physical form of the community in which we intend to build. To do this, we have developed a series of graphic techniques, which we call UDA X-rays.TM Each of these drawings represents one element at a given scale (e.g., street patterns, figure/ground, parks and open space, and topography,

among others). Usually the X-rays are done at three different scales. Each drawing is studied to uncover problems that may exist within the system represented (streets are usually the most revealing). These problems are then cross-referenced with the issues raised in the public process in order to understand the role such problems have played in the life of the community.

C. Visual Base Materials

For a vision to be collective, it must be made physically visual. We do that not only through plans and other two-dimensional drawings, aerial and eye-level perspectives, but also, when appropriate, through models we construct in order to test out ideas during the public process.

D. Precedent Research

The most successful mixed-income developments create a new image for the community and fit seamlessly into their neighborhood contexts. To accomplish that with both the design of public space and the architecture of buildings, we conduct detailed investigations of streets and buildings admired in the community as exemplars of the best town-building traditions of the region. By continuing these traditions in the new construction, confidence is quickly established in the development. These continuities also integrate new development into the existing fabric, stimulating the revitalization of surrounding areas.

E. The Urban Assembly Kit

Although our goal is the creation of whole places, we are working within a system that still builds and administers the parts separately. Therefore, in our own work, we have developed an "Urban Assembly Kit." For each project we first develop the concept as a whole and then its elements are separated and dealt with separately, as part of an assembly kit. By being described separately, the streets (for example) can be designed in detail and approved and financed by the appropriate agencies and groups. Their design, however, creates a framework into which the other elements can be plugged.

The components of the kit include:

1. *Framework of Streets* consisting of an inventory of street types in plan and cross section to be approved and implemented by the Department of Public Works and other public agencies.

2. *An Interconnected Network of Public Open Space* comprised of parks, streetscapes, trails, bikeways, natural features, conservation areas, and institutional open space to be funded, approved, and implemented by the Park Board and environmental agencies.
3. *Block Patterns* depicting a range of block types and sizes that can accommodate different lot types and building programs, providing options and flexibility to respond to the developer's and the community's program.
4. *Lot and Building Types* illustrating a range of lot types for each block type, each of which can accommodate a number of different building types and programs, for which costs can be determined and which can be approved by public reviewing agencies.

F. Architecture

As architects, we are concerned with how architecture contributes to the successful attainment of the stakeholders' vision for the neighborhood. We develop an inventory of architectural elements, in a variety of architectural styles, which can be used for the different building types and programs. Our work in this area includes:

1. *Three-dimensional Images of the Proposed Neighborhood Spaces and Buildings* that set easily understood standards for the development process.
2. *Design Guidelines* that set the key aspects of building design: massing, composition, windows and doors, color, and materials.
3. *Pattern Books* that provide the design elements of individual buildings.
4. *Prototype Designs* that set standards.

Together, these urban design tools provide benchmarks, reference points, and a common road map to guide the (re)development of neighborhoods, districts, and cities, regardless of how projects may be phased over time.

VI. HUD, PUBLIC HOUSING, AND NEIGHBORHOODS

The role the Federal government has played in the development and revitalization of local neighborhoods has contributed to the compartmentalization of cities into a single-issue system of departments and agencies that have kept city-building fragmented for decades. While the problems this approach creates can be found

across the board, regardless of the type of urban development project under discussion, nowhere are the problems more poignant and pronounced than in federally-funded, low-income housing.

Early in the twentieth century, the U.S. government began to build low-income housing for those unable to obtain decent, clean housing. Over the years, it was HUD's practice to fund housing projects with boundaries and design standards that tended to separate federally funded housing from the neighborhoods in which they were inserted. The problems of this approach are well documented. The projects became stigmatized; the architecture itself became a symbol of poverty suffused with the image of crime, drug gangs, unemployment, and despair. The impact these projects had on surrounding neighborhoods was devastating, contributing to the destabilization of many urban communities. The projects isolated their residents from other neighbors and from the opportunities of the city.

The value of an urbanist design perspective became clear to UDA when we remodeled the exterior of the Diggs Town projects in Norfolk, Virginia. The design of the complex was profoundly anti-urban and had a devastating impact on its residents. Through exterior remodeling of the buildings it was possible to re-establish urbanity in the neighborhood and positively affect the residents. Diggs Town is an excellent example of how funding; cooperation among governmental agencies, site administrators, community leaders and residents; and appropriate programming can stimulate a resurgence of neighborhood pride and social mobility.

Diggs Town, remodeled in 1990, was the beginning of HUD's reevaluation of its role in building cities and towns. In 1993, HUD initiated the HOPE VI program that provides funding for homes within a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization program. The barriers and boulders that had been formed by superblock subsidized housing projects began to be disassembled, replaced with a "confetti" approach. Instead of single-income projects, HOPE VI requires subsidized housing units be developed within the context of a mixed-income revitalization of the distressed neighborhood, sprinkling in the subsidized units in a manner that makes them indistinguishable from market-rate housing in a neighborhood that offers a mix of rental and homeownership units. With this change of direction, the stigma of subsidy has disappeared in communities and new life has been injected into some of the most decayed parts of our cities.



Diggs Town, Norfolk, Virginia 1990



Diggs Town, Norfolk, Virginia,
After the remodeling of the exterior that creates a neighborhood

This change of direction has fostered a radically different design and development process, one that calls for collaboration among developers, city agencies, housing authorities, institutions, and citizens. This is often difficult and presents challenges to the design process, in part because all of these groups are required to operate, indeed cooperate, in a new way. For example, Housing Authority staff members, accustomed to serving a dependent population, now find themselves acting as entrepreneurial real estate developers, attempting to attract homeowners and renters who can afford to choose where they live. Private developers find themselves coordinating social service programs for family self-sufficiency programs. City agencies are working collaboratively with formerly rival departments; architects and planners, along with city agencies and housing authorities, are working closely with community-based organizations. Interests that were once in conflict have become more closely aligned.

A common challenge in urban redevelopment and neighborhood revitalization programs is that these efforts often entail an entrepreneurial component. Urban Design Associates frequently collaborates with Zimmerman Volk Associates. They are creative market analysts who base their projections of what will succeed in the marketplace based on market potential rather than current demand. As a result, the designs must not only respond to changing market conditions, they must also help change the market by transforming the image of the place. In other words, if an appropriate environment is created and we build correctly, what impact will that have on increasing the market potential? The net effect is that the residential development program (beyond the HUD projects which have a fixed program) can change in the course of the design and development process. But, the approval process and the funding for public improvements still require the same precise cost and density data. The Urban Assembly Kit is useful in setting the frameworks for public improvements, creating blocks that can be surveyed and engineered, and in detailing a flexible array of block, lot and building types for development.

VII. PARK DU VALLE (LOUISVILLE, KY)

The project I am about to describe was designed using some or all of the techniques I described earlier. My hope in including it is to demonstrate both the consistency of approach and the diversity of image, scale, density, and configuration these techniques support.



Park DuValle, Louisville, Kentucky
Before Hope VI Redevelopment



Park DuValle, Louisville, Kentucky
redeveloped as a traditional mixed income neighborhood

At the western edge of the city, in a location that had little going for it except a memory of its stronger past, the Park Du Valle development has transformed this neighborhood into an extremely desirable residential location with homes featuring front yards and porches, and a small, mixed-use town center. A new parkway system extends the one designed by Frederick Law Olmsted at the end of the nineteenth century. By creating a series of good addresses, lined with substantial houses that reflect Louisville's great architectural traditions, Park DuValle accommodates a range of rental and for-sale housing costs that serves many markets, from public housing residents to persons building \$250,000 houses. There are 1100 new houses in the plan in a mixture of single-family and two- or three-family houses as well as some apartment houses. The pattern of development extends into the adjacent blocks and reflects the character of those blocks.

In this effort and others, HOPE VI funding is combined with private financing. Often, key elements are placed off the original site as part of the strategy to integrate the new development into the fabric of the city. In fact, the entire process and the built end result are indicators of a return to civility and urbanity in neighborhoods where these seemed hopelessly lost. The physical structures themselves create a framework for successful mixed-income development. In contrast with the conventional wisdom that suggests that people prefer to live and mingle only amongst "their own," the new urbanist approach fosters a spirit of community in neighborhoods such that very different people share the space amiably, and with respect, appreciation and a sense of personal investment in its character and continued quality.

The built result fits into its context, rather than a narrow set of national rules. The wide range of participants enables communities and urbanists to practice town-building.

VIII. DOWNTOWNS AREN'T DARK ANYMORE

In the post World War II period, as suburban development boomed, downtowns withered. These traditional "central business districts" and downtown shopping districts failed to compete with their less urban rivals because of perceived inconvenience and safety concerns. At first, downtowns tried to reinvent themselves following suburban forms, but by diluting their urbanity, they sealed their fate as business and retailing centers. But then, beginning in the early 1980s, these urban centers began to find new life as mixed-use districts that combine entertainment, cultural activi-

ties, shopping, business, governmental and civic uses, and downtown living. After a long period in which virtually no new downtown housing was built, a substantial market emerged for downtown apartments. By being in an urban setting in the middle of the action, either as lofts in rehabilitated historic buildings or as apartments in new buildings, the new wave of downtown residential has quickly expanded and become the essential ingredient in the revitalization of downtowns. As twenty-four hour, seven days a week neighborhoods, they have the image of security and stability that makes it comfortable for people from all over the region to come and participate in the urban life.

IX. BUILDING FOR CITY LIFE

A direct connection exists between the form of urban spaces, the process by which we design and build them, and the level of civility and urbanity they foster. The New Urbanist approach is really not new; it comes from observations of cities that work successfully as urban(e) environments because they make sense both functionally and culturally. People relate to such places because they respond to human needs and interests, striking responsive chords. For that reason, urbanist principles are being adopted and applied across the United States and around the world. These principles are intended to restore urbanism as a fine art and as a way of thinking that is both generalist and holistic, spawning urban spaces that are whole places in every sense. As we move forward, we need to continue to exchange ideas and engage a broad spectrum of people in the process of envisioning, rebuilding and revitalizing the cities we all love so dearly.

